

A D D R E S S

“ON THE VALUE OF WRITING,”

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

SOCIETY OF ALUMNI

OF THE

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA,

AT THEIR ANNUAL MEETING:

JUNE 29TH, 1849:

BY GEORGE E. DABNEY.

CHARLOTTESVILLE:

PRINTED BY O. S. ALLEN & CO.

1849.

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA, }
June 29th, 1849. }

DEAR SIR,

By a resolution of the Society of Alumni, the thanks of that body were tendered to you for the chaste, appropriate and able Address with which you favored them to-day. And by another resolution a copy for publication was requested.

As the organ of the Society, we take pleasure in performing the duty of requesting a copy of your interesting Address. The marked attention which was paid to that Address during its delivery before a large audience, leaves no doubt upon our minds as to the satisfaction which will be afforded by its appearance in print.

We are, sir, very respectfully,

your obed't. serv'ts.,

R. B. GOOCH,

P. H. GOODLOE,

J. S. DAVIS,

JOHN B. MINOR,

THOS. S. GHOLSON.

To Professor GEORGE E. DABNEY.

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA, June 29, 1849.

GENTLEMEN,

Your note requesting a copy of the Address, which I delivered to-day before the Society of Alumni, has just been received. In compliance with that request, I place a copy in your hands, although I can scarcely hope that any "satisfaction will be afforded by its appearance in print."

With thanks for the courteous manner in which you have communicated the Resolution of the Society,

I remain very respectfully,

your obedient servant,

GEORGE E. DABNEY.

Messrs. R. B. GOOCH,

P. H. GOODLOE,

J. S. DAVIS,

JOHN B. MINOR,

THOMAS S. GHOLSON,

} Committee.

210730

1870

Received of the Treasurer of the
County of ... the sum of ...
for ...

Witness my hand and seal this ... day of ...
1870

Attest my hand and seal this ... day of ...
1870

By the Treasurer
[Signature]

ADDRESS.

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN :

When I first heard my name mentioned in connexion with this occasion, I should have followed the natural impulse of one, so little accustomed to public speaking, by at once protesting against my nomination, had I not believed that such a step would have indicated an expectation of the appointment.

But a little reflection changed this feeling, to which perhaps I ought in prudence to have yielded, and decided me if elected, not to decline the honor, however unexpected and unmerited.

I felt that, as one of the older alumni of this now flourishing University, I ought not to set the example of shrinking from the duty, which the kindness of you, its friends and representatives, had imposed.

As a western citizen of this undivided, and I trust indivisible commonwealth, I was anxious to evince my unabated attachment to this, the proudest monument of her zeal in the cause of literature and science.

Above all, as being one who in a narrower sphere had devoted his humble talents and acquirements to the same great cause, I thought myself bound to exhibit that social, catholic spirit, indispensable to every votary of learning, which is the proper foe of all selfishness and bigotry.

From these motives, in addition to the gratification which I derived from being the object of your choice, I appear here this day, as your representative.

There are many, very many subjects on which I might address you at such a time, and my only difficulty has been in making a proper selection.

I might congratulate you on the brightening prospects and growing usefulness of our alma mater, and suggest measures by which its interests and its reputation might be still farther promoted. But in so doing, I should dread encroaching on the province of those able professors who have been placed here, as its constant guardians and ornaments, and of those distinguished gentlemen, who periodically convene from different portions of the State, to adopt such improvements, as experience, the great mother of wisdom, may suggest.

I might dwell on one or more of those various branches of learning, which the students of this institution have such ample means of acquiring.

I might speak of those classic tongues, which, in despite of the protest of modern utilitarians, still form the study and mental training of the young, and command the admiration of mature scholars.

I might commend their daughters, the languages of modern Europe, already offering such ample and increasing stores of literature, and steadily growing in importance to us, as our intercourse with Europe becomes more frequent and familiar.

I might praise Mathematics, as that noble science which disciplines the intellect to concentrated effort, forms the basis of so much practical knowledge, and in its higher applications, guides the astronomer, with unerring certainty, through the boundless realms of space.

I might pass from the exact to those experimental sciences, to whose advancement the former have so largely contributed, while the latter have so much increased human comfort, have removed so many impediments to human intercourse, have so greatly diffused commerce, literature, and the arts, and, by constantly enlarging as it were the bounds of creation, as suggested by one of the most ingenious of modern sceptics,* have thereby strengthened the natural evidence of a great creator.

The studies of Law and Medicine have long possessed attractions so irresistible to young Virginians, that it would be entirely superfluous to say anything in their commendation. Of the former especially, I could say nothing which was not better said two years ago, by its enthusiastic and experienced advocate.

Intrinsically important, as they both are, the one to the order, the other to the physical comfort of society, as avenues to wealth and distinction, they have always had at least their due share of attention.

Last though not least, comes that great science, which teaches man his own intellectual and moral nature, and the solemn duties and responsibilities which it involves.

Had I not been so ably anticipated by my immediate predecessor in addressing this society, I might discuss the most vital of all subjects to a free people, the best mode of educating the masses, and thus preparing them for the great task of self government.

*Hume.

These topics, or any one of them would form a theme of extended and interesting examination. But leaving them to gentlemen more specially versed in them, and who can set forth their nature and value with far more eloquence, I shall confine my remarks to an art simple in itself, but intimately connected with every department of human knowledge.

I mean that noble art of writing, which, instead of allowing human thoughts and discoveries to float down to succeeding generations on the uncertain breath of tradition, crystallizes them, as it were, in monuments, perishable in appearance, but in reality more durable than brass or marble—that art, which highly valuable at its first invention, has constantly increased in value with the progress of the other arts, with the advance of the sciences, and with the extent of human intercourse.

I propose to consider the advantages of its cultivation under four aspects 1st. In regard to the intellectual training, 2d. The happiness, 3d. The reputation, of the cultivator, and 4th. His usefulness.

It has now become a trite remark, but one important enough to bear frequent repetition, that all education is intended rather to train the mind for subsequent effort and acquisition, than to store it with an ample fund of practical information. It is ignorance of this truth, which misleads most of those snarlers at liberal education, who complain that it is not the philosopher's stone, converting every thing to gold; forgetful that, if it were, its possessors would Midas-like starve for moral and intellectual food.

But to all men of enlarged views, it must ever form the great subject of inquiry, what method of study is best calculated to promote habits of accurate and profound thought, and to fit the intellectual powers for grappling with the difficult questions of practical life.

Now it is a fact beyond all contradiction, that nothing so much contributes to the accuracy of our thoughts as the necessity of committing them to paper. Floating through our own minds, or orally communicated to others, they may often seem clear and well-arranged, when, if written, they could not bear the ordeal of examination. It is therefore plain, that any plan of instruction will be greatly improved by requiring frequent and accurate written outlines of the subjects taught. I am now leaving out of view entirely the elegances of composition, and considering written exercises, merely as a sort of compulsion to precise ideas

of the definitions and principles of science, and even of the order and connexion of facts. It cannot be denied that instruction is often miserably deficient in clearness and accuracy, not only from other causes, but in no small degree, from the neglect of writing, as a means of grounding knowledge. Who, that knows the carelessness of thought, orthography, and expression, apparent in the compositions of many of our so-called men of education, can fail to deplore that deficiency. Heedless of the old maxim, *Festina lente*, instructors often allow their pupils to pass, with the speed of the electric telegraph, over subjects, which can only be mastered by patient and long-continued study. To such teachers I would say with the earnestness of Demosthenes, insisting on the value of action, writing is the first, the second, and the third thing needful.

So far I have considered writing, only, as the means of learning, arranging and storing away the thoughts of others. But it possesses the much higher advantage of testing and disentangling our own, and cultivating, in the best manner, the taste and the imagination. Mere speaking may and does give readiness of thought and language, but can never impart that accuracy to the conceptions, and perfect finish to the style, which none, but the writer actual or mental, can ever attain. I say mental, because it is well known that some possess the rare faculty of not only arranging thoughts, but fixing words, in their memories, as completely, as others do on paper.

Carefully prepared original composition should constitute an essential part of education, from elementary schools up to universities. Early and continued habit is necessary to make it, as it ought to be, easy and agreeable. Many illustrious examples may indeed be pointed out, in which literary talent and industry have risen superior to the want of this training, as well as to every other obstacle in the road to usefulness and fame. But not a few of those who have thus mounted to literary distinction, apparently by the mere buoyancy of genius, trace their ardour in its pursuit, if to no other school, to that best and earliest, the domestic hearth.

But let the conductors of seminaries for education estimate the value of this branch of instruction, far above the ease of the learners and themselves, and the temporary popularity of their schools. Let them cherish it, as an auxiliary to all others, and, as far better adapted, than any other, to make their pupils useful and distinguished citizens.

Presupposing this early and constant training, it is easy to perceive that habits of composition may contribute greatly to *happiness*. I speak now of that pure happiness which may be enjoyed out of the glare of political distinction, and without an extended literary reputation. How much of our enjoyment may be derived from a correspondence with our friends, from a comparison of those *jeux d'esprit*, those fugitive lines, or occasional essays, which amuse or interest our own circle, although never meant for the public eye! This is one of those innocent and perennial pleasures, of which an energetic and industrious man of education need never be deprived by adversity. How infinitely preferable is it to those coarse amusements, and that coarser scandal, too often introduced to relieve the *tedium vitae*! It is better than mere reading, because it compels us to think, and usually prevents that dissipation and corruption of mind, often consequent on indiscriminate reading. It gratifies a vanity, not only harmless, but useful, while it elevates the conceptions, refines the taste, and fills the mind with an enjoyment that leaves no sting behind.

But, when we consider *fine* composition, as one of the principal avenues to the temple of fame, its advantages are more strikingly prominent. Some indeed, with the fallen statesman in the play, would "charge us to fling away ambition." But theirs is the very common mistake of proscribing a good principle for its abuse. The desire to hand down our names to coming generations, "the longing after immortality" has been always regarded, as one of the strongest indications that we are really immortal. Ambition is evidently a passion implanted in the human breast for noble purposes, and it is only, when it is directed to paltry or criminal objects, or seeks its gratification by base means, that it deserves contempt or execration.

Its honorable indulgence is an innocent pleasure, and, at the same time, one of the most efficient means of usefulness. Shorn of his reputation, the ablest and best man is not only comparatively useless, but, from mortified pride, often becomes a positive nuisance. Action, speaking, and writing are the three great highways to distinction.

Many have unhesitatingly assigned the preference to the first of these great avenues. Cicero in his *De Oratore*, with some apparent inconsistency, asks "Who is there, that, if he should estimate the knowledge of renowned men, by either the utility or greatness of their achievements, would not prefer the commander to the orator"? A southern

statesman, who once filled a large space in the public eye, expressed the same opinion, and sustained it with the ingenuity which uniformly characterized him. That these two great men in this but echoed the popular sentiment, we have repeated and melancholy proofs in the experience of our own, as well as other countries. The same popular voice would doubtless clearly and loudly declare its preference for the eloquence of the tongue over that of the press. But not being one of those who always consider the vox populi, as the vox Dei, I must be permitted to question the absolute certainty of either conclusion.

There certainly are cases in which the importance of action or spoken eloquence is inestimable; as for instance, where some bold leader or popular orator kindles the justly excited passions of an oppressed people into the blaze of successful resistance. Such was the action of William Tell and John Hampden, such the eloquence of a Henry and a Mirabeau. Nor can their greater value be denied in those rare cases, where the waves of popular excitement are stilled by the energetic decision of one actor or speaker. Such was the conduct of General Gordon, who saved the British house of Commons from an infuriated mob, by a well-timed threat to a misguided relative—such the eloquence of Martin Luther, when issuing from his temporary retreat, he brought back his fanatical disciples to reason—such that of Lamartine, when, by his single voice, he held in check the red republicans of Paris.

But, on the other hand, speeches and exploits, however brilliant, are often as useless and evanescent, as those ice-palaces which Russian monarchs have sometimes erected for their amusement; while valuable and striking thoughts, embalmed in appropriate and eloquent language, and committed to the sure custody of the press, have the beauty, solidity and permanence of the granite edifices with which the same monarchs have adorned their capital.

It has been often objected to men, immured in closets, and devoted to literary pursuits, that they never acquire that practical ability which nothing but constant intercourse with mankind can impart and perfect. Yet surely it must be admitted, that the union of literary and practical talent is neither impracticable, nor uncommon. But granting their incompatibility for argument's sake, I must contend for a more extensive meaning of the word *practical*, than that which, in accordance with popular usage, I have so far given to the term. I maintain that all men have practical genius,

who elevate the physical, moral, social or intellectual condition of the nation or race to which they belong, and that, in this acceptation of the word, its application to many a recluse student is far more just, than to any hero or statesman, who ever dazzled the world by his renown.

There were doubtless many Greeks who pronounced Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, and other writers mere closet dreamers, not to be mentioned in the same day with Solon, Miltiades, Themistocles, or Demosthenes. But who contributed more to the virtue, refinement, intellectual cultivation, and happiness of the Athenians, who did more to make them glorious in after ages, their legislators, warriors and orators, or those men of the pen, who have been the models and oracles of all subsequent writers?

The ambitious Romans, far more averse to speculation, tried in vain to dam out the mighty tide of learning, wisdom, and taste which set in from conquered Greece. Had they succeeded, those literary monuments, which will survive every other vestige of their brilliant, yet bloody career, might never have existed.

In modern times also, the popular feeling has commonly elevated the Hampdens and even the Cromwells, above the Bacons and the Miltons. Yet it may well be asked, which class has left more enduring marks of its power and beneficence. The reputation of many of the former, obscured by party malignity, has but slowly and with great difficulty, emerged from the mists with which it was surrounded. But the evidence of intellectual greatness in the ~~former~~, has been always too clear to be resisted, and, thanks to modern invention, has been placed beyond the reach of that sort of destruction, which the Mahometan Caliph inflicted on the literary treasures of Alexandria.

Although a more perishable writing material has been substituted for those anciently employed, the art of printing has rendered all valued and popular works far more durable, if not absolutely indestructible. When copies could be multiplied, only by the slow process of writing, the annihilation of many valuable works might have been involved in the destruction of a single library. But now all popular writers may defy alike the censor and the barbarian. From every conflagration accidental or designed, they will rise phoenix-like with stronger pinion, and brighter plumage.

In this land, the admiration of popular eloquence is a perfect mania. The witty author of *Salmagundi* called our government a great logocracy, and the lapse of forty years

Carthar
JRS.

has by no means lessened the propriety of the epithet. Every man who has any political ambition, and few men educated or uneducated are exempt from the passion, sets up for an orator, and spouts away, too often "in one weak, washy, everlasting flood."

Far be it from me to depreciate eloquence, that mighty art by which, not only through ideas and words, but through gestures, tones, and looks, the understanding is convinced, the heart touched, and the imagination kindled. It is indeed a god-like faculty, when applied to the noble purposes for which it was designed. But in our just admiration of its power, let us not overlook, what is easily demonstrable, that the tangible evidence of great eloquence has been preserved by writing alone, that the highest order of eloquence is unattainable without writing, and that the relative importance of composition, as a means of usefulness and fame, is increasing every day, with the cheapness of publication, the facilities of communication, and the certainty of preservation.

History tells us that Pericles was not only a great statesman, but a consummate orator. Yet how dimly shines his reputation for eloquence, compared with that of Demosthenes, who trimmed his midnight lamp over written speeches, many of which have survived the wreck of literature, to form the models of succeeding orators, and to command the admiration of mankind! Pericles, with all his industry and prudence, was either less fortunate, or less careful in the preservation of his orations.

Hortensius, admitted to have been almost the equal, was long the rival of Cicero; yet, as none of his orations have reached us, his fame rests entirely on the *writings* of others.

Lord Bolingbroke was, in his day, considered the most eloquent speaker in the British parliament; but, as the debates were not then reported, and he did not write out his speeches for publication, his renown, as an orator, is derived entirely from tradition, and from the inference to be drawn from the splendor of his extant compositions.

Lord Chatham gave perhaps the highest evidence of commanding eloquence that the world has ever seen. The six hundred members of the house of Commons, with Lord Mansfield at their head, trembled at his nod. Yet, while his fame, as a minister, must last as long, as the history of his country is preserved, his oratorical reputation is established on a basis far less enduring, than that of Edmund Burke, whose rising in the house was often the signal for clearing the benches and galleries. The former, in thought, language,

and manner, studied *present* impression most profoundly and successfully, but was not equally careful about the reputation of his speeches with *posterity*. On the contrary, Burke, industriously perfecting and preserving those orations to which his cotemporaries sometimes listened with impatience, has left us the richest treasures of passion, imagination, and wisdom, in the English language.

Our own "forest-born Demostheness" was an orator of undoubted and rare powers. But what tangible proof will posterity have of that high genius to which his auditors so strongly testified? The fragments of some, and the full reports of other speeches, certainly do not justify his unequalled reputation, nor place him on a par with Ames, Webster and other Americans, whose orations have been embalmed in finished composition. The aroma, the enchantment of his delivery could not be preserved.

But not only is writing, sustained by printing, the best preserver of eloquence; but it is that alone which can give it its highest polish and excellence. In the language of Cicero, "*Stilus optimus, et praestantissimus dicendi effector et magister.*" It is true indeed that some men have greatly excelled in popular speaking, who have been indifferent writers. But they have been seldom, if ever, orators of the highest order. All the greatest orators of ancient and modern times, if they have not actually written their speeches, have exercised themselves carefully and assiduously in composition.

Demosthenes wrote incessantly. Cicero was the most admirable and various prose-writer in the Latin language. Burke, whose colloquial powers were so great, that Doctor Johnson, who had often felt them, declared him capable in one hour of making a stranger to his name and character pronounce him the greatest man in England, wrote and rewrote his speeches, like the veriest tyro in composition. William Pinkney, the prince of American lawyers, who was equal to great extemporaneous bursts, fixed every word and syllable of his great efforts in his mind, if not on paper, and is said to have died a martyr to his industry and his ambition.

But one of the most important points on which I wish to fix your attention, is the immense increase in the rapidity and extent of circulation, which printing has given to all written compositions.

Demosthenes spoke to an Athenian audience, swelled, in occasional great causes, by visitors from the other Grecian states; even in their written form, his orations found at first no larger public, than the same petty states, and their colo-

1. Patrick Henry

nies, through which they could be diffused by no other means, than the slow process of manual copying. As the knowledge of Greek literature was extended, after the conquests of Alexander, they were probably circulated in the East, but at what would seem a snail's pace to modern apprehension. Two centuries elapsed, before they reached the neighboring peninsula of Italy, and nearly three, before they kindled in the heart of his great rival at Rome the undying fire of emulation.

Cicero had not only larger audiences, but grander themes, and a far wider theatre for the display of his wonderful powers. The case of Verres has been compared with that of Warren Hastings, which I believe stands alone in English history. But the governor of Sicily was one of many provincial governors equally atrocious, and owes his infamous celebrity to the genius of his prosecutor. He who spoke, with energy and success, in such causes, could not but have a fame coextensive with an empire, then embracing civilized mankind.

But the means of diffusing this reputation were slow, and after all it reached that very limited number only, who then had the opportunity of mental cultivation. Could Cicero have foreseen the infinite advantage in this particular, which a speaker of the present day enjoys, he would have wept at his evil destiny in being born too soon.

There are perhaps more copies of Webster's, Brougham's, or Lamartine's speeches, the day after their delivery, than ever existed of Cicero's in ancient times. These copies, steadily increasing in number, are circulated with almost inconceivable rapidity throughout Christendom. Steam lends its aid at once to their multiplication and transmission. The speed of lightning in the conveyance of intelligence, no longer a mere hyperbole, has become a startling and grand reality. In their original language, or in translations, speeches of striking merit are soon read to the furthest verge of a common civilization.

Representatives, who, in their speeches, do not seem to anticipate any effect on the body to which they belong, are often, in the slang of the day, accused of speaking to Buncombe. This charge I fear is too often true; but they may have other motives for such speeches, than the sordid one of making capital for their next election. They may be anxious to address, not only their own constituents, or even their own country, but the world. Conscious that the house to which they belong, is incorrigibly opposed to them, they may yet

appeal to public sentiment, in behalf of some great conservative or progressive principle. It is in speeches of this sort, that we may expect the most comprehensive thought, the most elevated sentiment, and the most finished and impressive style.

It stirs his blood, and stimulates his intellect, and kindles his imagination, when in the excitement of discussion, a speaker endeavors to impress his own convictions and feelings on a legislative body, or an assembled multitude. But how much more sublime the impulse, when he addresses, not merely those within the sound of his voice, but civilized mankind.

The arena for written eloquence is already vast, and, when that direct communication with the rich East which Columbus and succeeding navigators had vainly sought, shall be opened by some of the plans now suggested, it may extend into regions, as yet almost impervious to our commerce, civilization and literature.

But I have perhaps dwelt too long on writing, as the mere *auxiliary* of spoken eloquence, an ally whose importance has been increased by every discovery which has advanced learning, and facilitated intercourse. Composition needs not the *latera et vires* of the orator to make it useful, potent, and renowned. It may be combined with wise and energetic action, as was the case in Washington, Franklin and the founder of this University. They were no orators; yet no three men could be selected from among our revolutionary patriots, who have left a deeper impress on the political condition of this country. It was by prudent, able conduct, and by admirable composition, that they broke the chains of oppression, and established their own great reputation. They stand forth, as bright examples for the encouragement of many, who, conscious of not possessing the externals and habits of an orator, yet feel within them the genius and energy for high achievements.

But leaving these uncommon specimens of humanity, let us inquire what now most influences our elections, and shapes our political measures. Is it not the press? A great speaker may, like a flash of lightning, for a moment illuminate, or, like a tornado, for a time, purify the political atmosphere; but the lamp of the press shines with vestal steadiness, if not with vestal purity—the statements of the press falling, with the silent constancy of dew, on the public mind, furnish its aliment, and usually give it its direction.

Our country is constantly pervaded, not only by political, but literary and religious periodicals. They are read by pub-

lic and private men, by young and old, male and female, learned and unlearned, grave and gay, pious and irreligious, and are not the less potent, because they address themselves only to the eye. The daily, the weekly, the monthly, and the quarterly journal, each has its readers and its admirers. These may be scorned by some, as amusing, or at most informing only the present hour; but they really give a power to their editors and contributors, hardly to be overestimated.

In these periodicals and otherwise, such a tide of cheap publications, blended with much pernicious stuff, has been poured over the land, that our moral and religious community has regarded it, as a solemn duty, to meet it with a counter-current. It is worthy the ambition of every educated man, to contribute even a few drops to this purifying and salutary stream.

But are we always to remain satisfied with these ephemeral productions, and make no efforts at a permanent literature.

The style in which many of our old state papers is written shows what their authors could have done in literature, had the revolution and the critical period that followed it, allowed them time for the cultivation of letters. Now, when our population, wealth, and means of education are so much greater, when the active professions are full to overflowing, and the taste for reading is spreading every hour over an empire, third in extent, and first in institutions, on the globe, our cultivated men have the most spirit-stirring inducements to furnish the intellectual aliment of those swarming multitudes that will soon people our continent. An American author may write, not merely for an England, a France or a Germany, or for them all combined, but for a region larger than that *orbis terrarum* over which the boastful Roman claimed dominion. He can address a vast community, larger and larger portions of which can and will appreciate his genius. Far be it from me, if it were possible, to delude my countrymen into the belief, that they have reached the perfection of national education, and that there are no dark clouds of ignorance resting on our horizon. Such flattery would be treachery to the great cause of human improvement. The masses of foreign emigrants, the engrossment of gain, the sparseness of population, and in too many places, I grieve to say it, indolence and lethargy, have left multitudes without education. Yet, in spite of all these drawbacks, we shall, before many years, furnish a more extended and enlightened reading public, than Europe, with all its scholars, libraries and universities.

Our literature has certainly begun to exhibit signs of vigorous progress. With us, as well as elsewhere, may be found indications of the hurried, impetuous, puffing character of the age. There may be too great a disposition to exalt our speakers into Ciceros, our historians into Gibbons, our essayists into Johnsons or Addisons, our poets into Miltons. But in eloquence, in history, and in essay-writing, this, as a young country, has no reason to be ashamed of its living representatives. They are the first-fruits of a rich harvest, which will soon feed, delight, and invigorate our wide-spread community.

It was well said by a young gentleman, to whom I listened here with great pleasure twelve months since, that ours has as yet been mostly the "poetry of hope." We have produced no poets of the first order, none perhaps who will stand on the summit of Parnassus. Yet on the other hand, it would be hypercritical to deny, that some have risen far above that dead level of mediocrity, on which as Horace says, "men and Gods and bookstalls look down with equal aversion." I am not without hope, that our American muse will not ere long soar to still loftier elevations. The grandeur and beauty of our scenery, the sublime history of our revolution, the wild and adventurous character of our border population, the grand discoveries which are constantly giving new phases to human life, and new impulses to human thought, must afford stimulus and scope to the highest powers of those, who, "mute inglorious Miltons" in less favorable circumstances, will here "wake to ecstasy the living lyre," to sing the proud memories of the past, the great realities of the present, and the bright hopes of the future.

Our literature is in promising boyhood, although not yet entitled to assume the firm step, and lofty port of manhood. This is the period above all others, when literary genius and industry may achieve a brilliant reputation, a reputation infinitely purer and more lasting than that of warriors and statesmen.

But writing claims our highest admiration, when brought to the surest of all tests, usefulness to our associates, to our country, and to mankind. Intellectual training, fame, and even temporal happiness should be subordinate to this, the noblest object on this side of the grave, and, when rightly sought, the best preparation for that which is beyond.

No instrument can be readier or more valuable than the pen in the service of friends. When used with prudence

and moderation, as well as energy, it vindicates the reputation of the living far better, than the bloody duel, and sends down the memory of the worthy dead unsullied to posterity.

The advantages of writing over speaking in its influence on society at large, are also manifest. Speaking is commonly designed for momentary impression and immediate effect. Hence the speaker is often tempted to employ arguments, adapted to his temporary purpose, without duly considering their truth, and ultimate tendency. But, when a man sits down in his closet, not to make his pen an instrument in carrying some point in which he has a personal, or sectarian, or party interest, but really to enlighten his fellow-creatures, he is presumed to lay aside, in some degree at least, those prejudices and transient motives, which often seduce the speaker. He writes or should write for posterity, as well as for the present generation, and therefore should state no fact nor principle, whose truth is not established by the closest and most impartial scrutiny.

He has opportunity, not only to mature his thoughts, but to weigh and perfect the language by which his ideas can be rendered most clear and convincing to the understandings, most touching to the feelings, and kindling to the imaginations of his readers. If he lose the fire of excitement, he gains the soberness of reflection, and all those qualities of matter and style which will secure the confidence and applause of coming ages.

I am aware that many address themselves to the task of composition, with all the carelessness, prejudice, and bias of temporary objects, which often lead astray the speaker; it is indeed peculiarly the fault of the present hurried age. But I now speak of that calm deliberation, thorough examination, and careful finish, which are certainly within the power of every writer, not urged by immediate necessity, and which can alone give him a just claim to permanent reputation.

Oratory is but breath, and is lost, except so far as it leaves its traces on the minds and hearts of its actual hearers. In the language of another, "The power of persuasion is mighty, but perishable; its life for the most perishes with that of the speaker. It darkens with his eye; it stiffens with his hand; it freezes with his tongue."

But written eloquence remains, and communicates its impulse to after ages. It is said that some of those very tracts which, issuing from the pen of Luther, stirred the heart of Germany, even more than his trumpet voice, are still in existence.

This particular and accidental fact, however interesting, is but of trifling moment, when compared with another general one to which I have before alluded. When the rays, which now form the true shrine of genius, perish, its mighty spirit passes into another body, and perpetuates its spells.

While Louis, Frederick, Pitt, Napoleon, Metternich and Talleyrand were shaping the political destinies of Europe, Voltaire, Goethe, Rousseau, Burke, Hannah More, Scott and Byron were controlling the empire of the mind and the heart. That empire was no less real, powerful and extensive, because it gave its possessors no fasces nor regalia. It is still widening, as books circulate more extensively, and will ultimately embrace "every kindred and tongue" which is reached by the march of European civilization.

New favorites will be constantly arising, to claim admiration, and become the lions of the hour; but even should the fashion of reading old authors entirely pass away, all that is most valuable in their writings will be preserved by plagiarists and imitators.

We need every influence among us, to correct our tastes, to fix our habits, and change us from the roving, unsettled nation we now are, into a homeloving and home-improving population. Every thing among us is now tinged by the transient character of our people. Our speeches are for the most part loose, desultory and prepared to catch the popular breeze, not to abide the ordeal of criticism. Our writers have the same faults, and from the same cause. Our buildings and improvements are temporary, because we expect soon to leave the home of our childhood for some imaginary El Dorado. This migratory spirit is a fault inseparable from the blessing of a great national domain, open to every man of stout heart and strong hand, and is intimately associated with the hardy virtues of our pioneers. Yet fixedness of principle will usually be found connected with fixedness of residence, and those who are constantly roving in pursuit of gain or excitement, will too often burst the restraints of public sentiment, that are fetters of iron to persons, always feeling themselves responsible to the same community.

To check this roaming temper at once, or entirely, would be no less impolitic, than impossible. Yet writers of genius, having the local and fixed attachments, apt to characterize men who live in quiet seclusion, may cooperate with circumstances, in gradually inspiring more settled tastes and habits, and thus moderate the excesses of what is, to some extent, useful and desirable.

But we are not to suppose that the power of doing good is confined to *great* writers; he who puts forth the simplest school-book, well adapted to its purpose, may be a greater benefactor to mankind, than shining heroes or statesmen. A tract which brings one soul from vice to virtue, from impiety to religion, outweighs in value the whole material world. Think what a field of usefulness then lies before the writer, not only in this land, but in those heathen regions now opening to Christian civilization.

I might greatly extend my remarks on this branch of the subject; but I feel it to be unnecessary, because every circumstance of modern times, which makes fine composition a broader and smoother road to the temple of fame, has also given it tenfold utility. These considerations prove writing, especially since the printing press has given it wings, an invention of incalculable importance, and call on all men of education, especially those who have not the gift of oral eloquence, to cultivate this means of immortalizing themselves, amusing, instructing, refining and elevating their kind. They demonstrate that, in every institution of the first class, composition in our own language, may well monopolize the talents and time of the most gifted professor; and that students should regard it, not as a dry and irksome task, but as an accomplishment which demands all their powers, and deserves all their enthusiasm.

I rejoice to learn that the young men assembled here, have shown their practical sympathy with the sentiments that I have expressed, by commencing a periodical, which is to be the exponent of their views, and the stimulant of their powers in composition. I trust that it may be conducted with zeal, with perseverance, and with permanent success.

It is for you also my brother Alumni to sustain, in this department the reputation of this University of Virginia, and of the entire South. Believe me that literary distinction is an object more worthy of your ambition, than the giddy heights of the successful statesman, or the greenest laurels of the conquering hero—that with it, you can attain usefulness without subserviency, secure power without intrigue, and win renown without blood.

If you are true to yourselves, to each other, and to your Alma Mater, even, when this splendid edifice shall have crumbled into dust, and the skill of the antiquary be required to ascertain its site, its memory, like that of the Lyceum and of the Academy, shall live in the works of those who once frequented its halls, and drank in its erudition.